

Resisting Censorship and Defending the Integrity of Federally Supported Information

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Federal information is under significant threat from the Trump administration's unprecedented levels of censorship, expressed through direct suppression of specific terms, distortion and deletion of research, and targeted cuts to agencies' funding and staffing that are the engine of federal information generation. These acts challenge the ongoing development and integrity of the federal research record and impede public access to that record. A flourishing, democratic society requires the free flow of reliable government-sponsored information, from its creation by qualified researchers to its use by other scholars and the general public. Ensuring access to reliable information is foundational to the profession of librarianship; as librarians, we must now work to protect that principle as it is being deliberately dismantled.

While bureaucratic enterprises like federal agencies can certainly accrete inefficiencies over time and new administrations understandably seek to align federal resources with new policy aims, the Trump administration's actions do not reflect a thoughtful corrective. Instead, the goal seems to be the crippling of the U.S. research enterprise. To illustrate the magnitude of this effort since January 2025: in a running tally last updated May 28, PEN America has identified over 350 terms that trigger reviews of agency-supported work and, in many cases, disqualify the research for continued or future funding; as of June 9, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) had canceled more than 2,100 grants reflecting approximately \$9.5 billion in research funding, though a June 16 federal court decision has ordered some to be reinstated; 65% of National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) staff were laid off in April, and as of June 28 just over 1400 grants, worth nearly \$430 million, have been terminated; and at the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), all 75 staff members were eliminated and approximately 1,200 program and state grants were terminated in late March, with some staff and grants provisionally reinstated per pending lawsuits.¹

These actions imperil a broad swath of federal information, from materials traditionally collected by the Federal Depository Library Program (i.e., that labeled by Jacobs and Jacobs as "Public Information" and defined as "the universe of content made available to the public by the federal government"), to research conducted by federal agency staff, research supported by federal grants, and supportive infrastructure (e.g., repositories, libraries and librarians) – it is all in jeopardy.² Librarians are tracking these developments with great concern. Indeed, the administration's actions threaten almost all of the eleven "Key Principles of Government Information" identified by the American Library Association, but none more significantly than the assertion that "Government information policy must ensure the integrity of public information."³ Ensuring information integrity is a core value of our profession, and we are witnessing—and being called to respond to—the profound disruption of the national systems underpinning reliable and trustworthy information.

Politics and Federal Information: A Brief History

This moment, of course, does not represent the first collision between politics and federally supported information in recent U.S. history.⁴ The Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) first began tracking suppression of research under George W. Bush's administration and has continued this work through subsequent presidential administrations, recording instances of interference in a public database.⁵ The Obama administration attempted to safeguard federally supported research by ensuring that federal agencies established science integrity policies; however these proved insufficient during President Trump's first term, in which he exerted new levels of effort to control the research activities of those agencies.⁶ The first Trump administration's response to the COVID pandemic and resistance to the scientific community's rapidly evolving understanding about causes, prevention, and treatment is perhaps most notable – but

it wasn't unique. That administration also ignored federal agency findings, relying instead on representatives and information from industry over experts and data from agencies; removed or changed information on agency websites; terminated some grants; forbade use of some terms; and attempted to reduce funding for targeted agencies.⁷

While the Biden administration sought to enact new policies to address both the weaknesses of the Obama era policies and the types of anti-information efforts seen within federal agencies in the first Trump administration, President Trump's current actions are bolder and more sweeping this time.⁸ In his second term, Trump is attempting to transform the entire national research infrastructure by engaging in more extensive censorship efforts, attempting to control public and private higher education institutions through funding cuts and lawsuits, and issuing a new science integrity standard that notably establishes makes no mention of research independence from political interference.⁹

Censorship's Many Guises

Those who have not yet been let go from a federal agency, had a grant terminated, or had to consider self-censoring by withdrawing or revising a manuscript based on newly forbidden words may not be closely tracking the ongoing changes related to research and education enacted through Presidential Executive Orders and expressed in new federal agency policies. Even with a narrowed focus on censorship, the administration's actions are challenging to keep up with due to the myriad permutations of that censorship.

Operationalizing Trump's stated intentions to end any considerations of gender, race and ethnicity and to support his administration's policy objectives (such as prioritizing the use of coal, gas, and oil in place of renewable energy sources), newly appointed heads of federal agencies have begun directly censoring agency-produced or -supported research, and some directors are employing such strategies to advance their own policy goals.¹⁰ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the National Science Foundation (NSF), the Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the National Cancer Institute (NCI), the NIH, and many others have developed lists of terms that are now either explicitly forbidden or that will trigger reviews of research projects and their related publications. These restrictions range from the seemingly ridiculous ("rural water," "systemic," and "peanut allergies") to the obviously political ("DEI" "global warming," and "vaccines").¹¹ As a concrete example, the CDC was not allowed to release information at the end of March forecasting the spread of measles and the efficacy of the measles vaccine. By June 24, 2025, several months later, the CDC website reflected 1,227 confirmed measles cases across the country, compared to 285 in 2024.¹²

The administration's restrictions regarding concepts of race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual identity have also extended to federal information developed for the benefit of the general public in both online and physical venues. The Department of Defense implementation of these orders required eliminating all online "DEI content" and anything with a focus on "immutable characteristics, such race, ethnicity, or sex."¹³ As a result, Arlington National Cemetery removed many pages from its website, including Jackie Robinson's military profile and a history of the World War II Navajo Code Talkers, both of which were brought back after public outcry.¹⁴ Detailed lesson plans about African American and women's military history, however, have either been removed from easy site navigation or taken down altogether.¹⁵

A separate Executive Order requires the removal of any "public monuments, memorials,

statues, markers, or similar properties" from National Park Service sites and other publicly managed land that does not sufficiently recognize the country's unique accomplishments and natural beauty of its landscape.¹⁶ While an uplifting focus is not unexpected at national public sites, this same order also mandates the posting of signs asking visitors to report any information presenting a critical or "disparaging" perspective.¹⁷ This form of censorship directly impedes the ability of park staff to accurately share the full history associated with a given federal location and has led to objections from organizations such as the Japanese American National Museum, which is concerned that information related to the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II will be erased from public view and public memory.¹⁸

Building on more direct forms of censorship described above, entire swaths of research and education associated with newly forbidden concepts have begun to be eliminated either through budget cuts or agency "reductions in force." In the area of climate change, the website that previously provided government-sponsored climate information for the general public, Climate.gov, now redirects to a climate page on the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA) website. All the staff who were maintaining Climate.gov have been let go, creating uncertainty about the future of this service's content and overall mission.¹⁹ Similarly, the US Global Change Research Program (USGCRP), which is responsible for the congressionally mandated quadrennial National Climate Assessment reports, has also been ended. Per administration orders in April 2025, the consulting contract for the 2028 report has been terminated and staff were removed from the program itself. As of June 30, the website has been taken down, eliminating ready access to the five previous reports. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) is now the stated home for these critical documents, but no section on NASA's website clearly collects the reports—and search results

only surface the third report, released in 2014.²⁰ Either of these instances could be understood as reasonable efforts to streamline public funds; however such an interpretation is doubtful given the diminished discoverability of the content, making it difficult to access this valuable government information.

Yet another permutation of censorship has been the distortion of knowledge and research. The administration has launched numerous such efforts, from framing global warming as beneficial, to requiring the NIH to investigate “transition regret,” to the aforementioned assertions that the measles vaccine is ineffective and dangerous.²¹ Libraries and librarians have not been exempted. The Trump administration’s renaming of the “Gulf of Mexico” and “Mount Denali” to the “Gulf of America” and “Mount McKinley,” respectively, and the unusually rapid update of the Library of Congress Subject Headings raised concerns at the time about the seeming ease with which librarians accommodated and incorporated these changes.²²

Development of new scholarship in target areas is being prevented through layoffs of agency-based researchers and cancellation of many thousands of both new grants and grant-sponsored work already underway, a de facto form of censorship.²³ As these examples illustrate, all disciplines have been impacted by the significant funding cuts applied across federal agencies, which have halted: scholarship into the mathematical field of homotopy theory; a study aiming to increase oral cavity cancer survival rates; research documenting an all-Black U.S. Army codebreaking unit in World War II; and local newspaper digitization projects across twenty-three states to support the preservation of unique historic content and its contribution to the longstanding National Digital Newspaper Program for public access via the Library of Congress.²⁴ Decisions in some of the many related lawsuits have required reinstatement of grants, but the administration has resisted compliance and, in some cases, has made it clear that follow-on legal challenges are not far off.²⁵ In his July 2, 2025 filing regarding his June 30 court order to restore some NIH grants, U.S. District Judge William Young in Massachusetts, appointed by Ronald Reagan, identifies the serious challenge the administration’s censorship poses to the integrity of the health focused federally supported research enterprise, but which logically extends to all areas:

Indeed, the American people have enjoyed a historical norm of a largely apolitical scientific research agency supporting research in an elegant, merit-based approach that benefits everyone.

That historical norm changed on January 20, 2025. The new Administration began weaponizing what should not be weaponized — the health of all Americans through its abuse of HHS and the NIH systems, creating chaos

and promoting an unreasonable and unreasoned agenda of blacklisting certain topics, that on this Administrative Record, has absolutely nothing to do with the promotion of science or research.²⁶

These many forms of censorship create gaps, fissures, and uncertainties within the government supported research record and instability in the related information ecosystem. This challenge to the integrity of federal information writ large is definitionally of significant concern to librarians.

Protecting Federal Information Integrity

The scale, scope, and speed of the administration’s actions, which began almost immediately after President Trump’s inauguration and continue as of the writing of this article in early July 2025, make it almost impossible to stay abreast of the specific implications. But librarians, situated so centrally in knowledge and research hubs, are well positioned to respond and many are doing just that.

Government information librarians (at UC San Diego and the University of Minnesota, for instance) are helping scholars navigate whirlwind changes in federally supported information by rapidly and regularly updating LibGuides to track the Trump administration’s actions, convey the implications to users, and provide reliable alternative sources where possible.²⁷ Others are focused on leading, participating in, or otherwise contributing to the numerous and massive efforts to secure federally supported data and publications before these materials are censored or disappeared.²⁸

Pre-existing initiatives like the Data Rescue Project and Data Lumos, to name just two, are expanding to meet the vast need.²⁹ New library partnerships, such as the UChicago Data Mirror, are forming to support and extend this work, and individual librarians have established complementary efforts, like Tracking Gov Info, to fill important gaps.³⁰

Still other librarians are organizing public resistance, as with the “Declaration to Defend Research from U.S. Government Censorship, which was created and released to provide individuals and organizations a shared, public location from which to condemn government censorship and encourage others to do the same. Having gathered now almost 5,000 signatories at the time of writing, the co-authors of the declaration (including the author of this paper) are now also promoting concrete actions to demand that elected officials and other decision makers intervene to end censorship.³¹

Inspiring Acts Inspire More Action

Librarians, highly attuned to censorship and threats against information access and intellectual freedom, are, as described above, responding with critical, concrete steps, steps that can move more of us to take any number of actions:

- Stay up to date about threats to government supported information, academic freedom, and academic libraries and talk with each other about the implications and potential responses. Peter Suber's running list of projects that track or monitor Trump administration actions and the websites and social media posts of organizations and initiatives such as the Union of Concerned Scientists, Stand Up for Science, EveryLibrary Institute, and The Impact Map are among the many excellent resources for keeping current.³²
- Identify and share instances of censorship when they occur, raising awareness, providing evidence, and possibly intervening.
- Sign and distribute public statements denouncing censorship and threats to federal information integrity, thus amplifying the reach of those statements and their potential to generate change.
- Spread the word about efforts organized by researcher communities.
- Share ways to take action with our networks of librarians and scholars.
- Participate in or support one of the many efforts to safeguard government supported data and publications.
- Contact elected officials to demand that they intervene to stop the administration's efforts related to the federal knowledge infrastructure.
- Write opinion pieces or letters to the editor in local news outlets to help the broader public understand the implications of the Trump administration's actions.

The above list is, of course, merely a sampling of the possible ways to be involved that are underway right now.³³ Often, though, the most effective actions are those specific to local circumstances, where the reasons for acting are most keenly felt and clearest to understand. Where we see a need, we can see an opportunity to respond and to invite others around us to join in, knowing that the accumulation of all our many efforts will be the most effective in preserving and protecting federal information.

Conclusion

The well-worn trope of existential crisis is unfortunately more than apt for the challenges to knowledge we currently face. The numerous expressions of government censorship are contributing to a worrisome destabilization of the federal information infrastructure; these acts are unlikely to cease and may possibly expand without encountering significant resistance. Indeed, the administration's 2026 federal budget, just passed by Congress as of this writing on July 3, and presented as a plan to reduce duplication of government services and overall expenditures, includes increased defense spending alongside significant funding cuts to agencies such as the NSF, as well as the complete shutdown of the IMLS.³⁴ As information professionals who are mission-driven, understand what is at stake, and take pride in supporting intellectual freedom and rigorous scholarly inquiry, we are being tested in a most extreme way. Librarians of all types must decide what each of us is willing to do to meet this moment. Many are responding in significant ways that we as a community can be quite proud of and take as inspiration to find our own ways to safeguard the creation of and access to an intact, rich body of federal information today and into the future.

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